

Shortgrass People Were Always Vulnerable To Prolonged Dampness

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MERTZON — All it's been doing out here for the past three weeks is rain and mist, then mist followed by more rain. If the skies don't clear pretty soon, the Shortgrass Country is going to become so swampy that the only sheep left will be dogie lambs behind the kitchen stove, plus some cows imported from the lower tip of the Florida Peninsula.

Indications are that the people are being hard hit, too. Reports are already circulating in regard to outbreaks of a fearsome softening of the finger and toenail cuticles. Local health officers say the increase in sore throats must be halted by Oct. 1 or there won't be a soul up and around who can shout up "scat" loud enough to frighten a lap dog.

However, these wet weather blights aren't a new experience for this area. In the days of the pioneers, our citizens used to suffer something terrible during rainy spells. Every time the skies were covered by a dreary overcast, red and white men alike would fall over in pile of coughing, fevered masses.

For example, one damp winter the senior medical officer of the Kiowa tribe, old Nest Egg, kept detailed records of his practice. These reveal that he used four sacks of Number One Bat Wings, pulverized, to halt an epidemic of warped, teepee-pole fever. To relieve sufferers of the frightful mildewed quiver rash, he claimed to have mixed in his wigwam and personally applied over 18 dozen owl-egg poultices. And to top it all the highly respected witch-doctor said that in the same period he completely unraveled a pair of matched hair balls while fighting off a pesky bronchial spirit that was literally wrecking attendance at death chant singsongs.

Nest Egg wasn't the only early day doctor to run into trouble during the monsoon seasons. (Don't be misled by the title "doctor." In reality he was a bone-prattling therapist, licensed to practice only this side of the Red River.) History leaves numerous tales of how midwives slaved across their districts, braving soaked, rubber-padded sidesaddles in order to attend the ever-mounting sick list. Though these healers were considered to be strictly specialists in delivering babies, invariably they were forced into general practice when the rains fell.

Specifically, they were called out to treat all types of ailments, ranging from the nervous conniptions which originated from the children's wet-weather habit of tracking the sod floors out into the front lot, to a worrisome lumbago induced by old nicks and scratches received in surprise tomahawk jousting contests with their red brothers.

A minor part of their service consisted of forestalling deep psychic injury among the patriarch — the founding fathers. You see, every time it stayed wet very long these old codgers' pride and joy, their chin whiskers, would wilt into a mass of hair about as appetizing as a dish of prunes at a champagne supper. So you can imagine, it took a pretty smooth-handed midwife to keep this calamity from permanently harming these proud old men.

The same sort of threat lingers over the Shortgrass Country today. Of course many of the old illnesses have disappeared; nevertheless there lurks in the background the ominous assurance that desert creatures can not stand many days of wet weather.

Offhand, I would guess that dry weather isn't too far over the horizon. But if it holds off another fortnight, it's going to take a real duster to get us all back on our feet again.